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Polite Responses to Stigmatisation
Ethics of Exemplarity among French Muslim Elites

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Anti-Muslim sentiments in Europe operate in a variety of forms and settings. From discrimination in the labour market (Adida et al. 2016) to unfair treatment in public institutions (Joly and Beckford 2006), physical assaults and verbal abuse (Chakraborti and Zempi 2012; Hajjat and Mohammed 2016) to subtle acts of misrecognition (Aranguren and Madrisotti 2019; Choi et al. 2019), and biased media coverage (Deltombe 2005; Baker et al. 2013) to hostile political rhetoric (Yılmaz 2016), Muslims are regularly exposed to stigma and exclusion.

Focusing on members of a prominent Muslim organisation in France, this article analyses how organised Muslims respond to anti-Muslim hostility. It thus shifts attention to the under-researched perspectives of those targeted by anti-Muslim stigmatisation and examines the ways in which Muslim activists resist and negotiate stigma. In investigating these questions, this article contributes to the rich literature on antiracist repertoires (Bickerstaff 2012; Dubet et al. 2013; Lamont et al. 2016; Witte 2018) in three ways: by underscoring the behavioural and emotional enactment of non-confrontational strategies, examining the class dynamics underpinning "polite" antiracist practices, and by underlining the ethical underpinnings of self-management in the face of stigma.

The limited research on collective antiracist tactics among Muslim populations in Europe has focused so far on advocacy movements that consider the struggle against Islamophobia as their priority (Barras 2009; Galembert 2015; Kassir and Reitz 2016; Koning 2016; Picot 2016; Asal 2017). In these movements, the shared experience of racism and exclusion delineates a "community of suffering" (Amiraux 2005: 33) and justifies the systematic mobilisation of legal resources in the search for justice as well as participation in public demonstrations. In contrast, the Muslim activists I interviewed expressed reluctance to engage in contentious actions and instead urge their coreligionists to deploy restrained and discreet methods of resisting racism. Unpacking their discourses and practices helps to expand understandings of collective antiracist strategies by delving into non-confrontational tactics, such as conflict-deflation, self-management, and conflict avoidance (Fleming et al. 2012; Lamont and Mizrahi 2012). These antiracist tactics have remained under the radar of studies on European Muslims, with the

exception of a recent stream of scholarship on the ways in which Muslim women resist and negotiate Islamophobic environments but which focuses on individual-level responses (Kloek and al. 2013; Beaugé 2015; Es 2019; Najib and Hopkins 2019). By considering the perspectives of Muslim activists interested in community uplift and promoting discreet coping strategies amongst their coreligionists, this article thus sheds light on an interesting yet unexplored alternative, away from meso-level movements using rights-based approaches and individual-level strategies of self-management.

Another ambition of the article is to bring social class back into the analysis of antiracist strategies. As demonstrated by a stimulating body of work (Feagin 1991; Lamont and Fleming 2005; Agius Vallejo 2015), members of marginalised groups deploy different antiracist repertoires according to their status and socio-economic resources. Socially privileged individuals, for instance, are more likely to draw on professional competence to establish themselves on equal footing with majority members in response to unfair treatment. The relevance of social background has been neglected to date in the literature on anti-Islamophobia movements and my paper seeks to redress this class-blind approach by highlighting how middle-class Muslim activists draw on specific arguments in their collective coping strategies. More specifically, I argue that the Muslim activists I worked with mobilise a middle-class set of values encompassing politeness, discretion, socio-economic uplift and good behaviour in response to stigmatisation – a distinctive set of values that I have conceptualised elsewhere as their respectability politics (Dazey 2018, 2021), borrowing this term from African-American studies (Higginbotham 1993). In doing so, these activists offer oppositional space to anti-Muslim hostility but also reinforce some of the hegemonic values of colour-blind French republicanism.

The analysis draws on an ethnographic case study on one of the largest Muslim organisations in France, the *Union des organisations islamiques de France* (UOIF).[i] From 2014 to 2018, I spent several months attending UOIF's activities across France, such as spiritual evenings for adults, Quranic classes for children, Friday prayers in mosques, and annual gatherings in and out of Paris. I also conducted life-story interviews with forty-two Muslim activists affiliated with the UOIF at some point of their life. During these interviews, we discussed their family history, educational and professional trajectory, activist career, and public activities. In addition to ethnographic observations and interviews, I collected and analysed internal documents produced by the organisation (newsletters, publications, communiqués, etc.) and conducted a systematic analysis of press articles mentioning the UOIF

(through the database *Europresse*). As demonstrated elsewhere (Dazey 2018), members of the UOIF tend to be first-generation North African migrants, hailing from the urban middle classes of their home country. Most of them came to France to pursue university studies (in contrast with the majority of post-WWII North-African migrants who came as workers), and became naturalised throughout the 1990s and early 2000s.[ii] Building upon their strong educational credentials as the majority has university degrees, including many masters and doctorates, UOIF members ascended to the French middle and upper-middle classes in terms of career attainment and lifestyles. For instance, the majority holds professional types of employment such as engineers, doctors or architects, pursues socially-marked leisure activities, and enjoys comfortable homes. This profile distinguishes them from the majority of Muslim populations in France who tend to remain lower-class despite growing social diversification, as well as from activists of rights-based advocacy movements, such as the *Collectif contre l'islamophobie en France* (CCIF), who tend to be second- or third-generation intellectuals.

The rest of the article is structured along four main parts. I first survey how the Muslim activists of the UOIF recognise and assess anti-Muslim hostility in French society. I then disentangle the ethos of responsibility underpinning their antiracist discourses, and in particular the ways in which Muslim activists consider their coreligionists responsible for debunking anti-Muslim prejudices. In the last two sections, I show how these schemes of interpretation led them to defend specific coping tactics that emphasise exemplary behaviour in response to stigmatisation as well as the distancing from a "victim-mentality" attitude – coping tactics that are deeply embedded in ethical considerations and pious projects of self-realisation.

Euphemised accounts of anti-Muslim hostility

Muslim activists of the UOIF are highly concerned about rising Islamophobia. They lament the numerous attacks against veiled women, the vandalism of Muslim places of worship, the profanation of Muslim graves, the biased media coverage of Islam and the politicisation of Muslim issues during electoral campaigns. The leadership committee issues regular communiqués to condemn such developments, and individual leaders have also signed public letters and participated in public conferences to denounce mistreatment. All these actions fall in line with one of the stated objectives of the UOIF, which is to "Fight against all forms of discrimination – racism, Islamophobia and incitement to racial hatred".[iii]

In these various settings, their denunciation of anti-Muslim hostility is characterised by three recurring patterns: accusing the mainstream media of being primarily responsible in the

reproduction of anti-Muslim prejudices, maintaining that veiled women are the most victimised people amongst Muslim communities, and creating moral equivalencies between Islamophobia and other forms of racism (anti-Christian hostility and anti-Semitism as well as racial discrimination). This last characteristic must be understood against the suspicions of *communautarisme* that weigh upon activists who denounce specific religious or ethnic discrimination. In the French Republican context, these activists are accused of withdrawing within their own community (Fassin 2006: 150) – a criticism that is extremely disqualifying in public conversations (Dufoix 2016; Mohammed and Talpin 2018) and that is regularly addressed at UOIF members given the numerous controversies surrounding their organisation[iv].

While UOIF activists actively denounce Islamophobia, they also call for qualified assessments of the phenomenon and are keen to distance themselves from an understanding of racism as a systemic organisation of inequality. At the International Day against Islamophobia, for instance, the UOIF representative (an Algerian-born teacher holding a master in history) "reiterated that despite this rejection of Islam and Muslims, it does not concern the entire society – many French do not pay into racism or Islamophobia".[v] In front of thousands of attendees and over direct retransmission on a satellite channel, UOIF president Amar Lasfar (a Moroccan-born entrepreneur who holds a master in economy)[vi] also promoted a nuanced understanding of anti-Muslim hostility during the ending ceremony of the Annual Gathering of French Muslims in 2016:

> The whole world is following live what is happening in France. Muslims in France are not persecuted [*persecutés*]. Muslims in France are not ill-treated [*maltraités*]. They have a few problems at times, and they just try to solve them. And a problem solved is acquired experience. We tell the whole world that we are where we are, and that we are citizens, French and proud of it![vii]

Lasfar's declaration downplayed current waves of animosity against Muslims (particularly strong in the aftermath of the 2015 terror attacks in Paris, Najib 2020) when he stressed that Muslims in France are neither persecuted nor ill-treated. Moreover, in his speech he euphemistically described encounters with prejudices as "experiences" to be learnt from, in line with pious engagement with stigma as a redemption ordeal (Beaugé 2015). Minimising racism is not uncommon amongst members of stigmatised groups but cannot be equated with the denials of racism by French elites, who are grounded into entrenched mythologies of colour

blindness designed to justify historically informed systems of inequality (Fassin 2006; Mazouz 2017).

Mitigation of anti-Muslim hostility on the part of Muslim activists instead needs to be understood at two levels: personal and collective. At the personal level, asserting that French Muslims are not victimised appears to be a way of preserving their own sense of self-worth and agency in hostile environments over which they have little control (Lamont and Mizrachi 2012; Harris and Hussein 2018). In the context of over-scrutiny and daily micro-aggressions, underplaying may be a way to maintain positive self-concept. At a more collective level, these expressions of minimised racism on the part of Muslim leaders make sense against the widespread accusations of victimisation that they face; that is, the suspicions that Muslims publicise their allegedly dubious grievances to raise their moral status. In France, the social reality of Islamophobia is regularly denied by politicians and journalists alike, and the very use of the term "Islamophobia" is regarded with suspicion (Hajjat and Mohammed 2016). By relativising the anti-Muslim hostility they face in French society, Muslim leaders of the UOIF are navigating the delicate situation in which they are entrapped, since those calling attention to the discriminations they face as Muslims are suspected of reinforcing the apparent non-universality of their concerns (Fernando 2014: 89) and making Islam an untouchable object. To counter that image, Lasfar denies that Muslims are excluded and stresses his attachment to equal citizenship in the French polity ("We tell the whole world that we are where we are, and that we are citizens, French and proud of it!). His mastery of the sort of neutral, non-identity-based discourse sounds acceptable to republican sensibilities.

I witnessed another expression of euphemised understanding of Islamophobia during a lesson taught at the Islamic weekend school affiliated with the local UOIF branch in Bordeaux (the *Fédération musulmane de la Gironde*), in which I spent several months observing activities. As I was presenting some key findings of my doctoral research in front of a classroom of twenty teenagers, the teacher – a Mauritanian-born imam with a PhD in political science – interrupted me to clarify the objectives of his association's activism. He explained that he tried to avoid a "logic of confrontation", encapsulated to his mind in "all this fuss around Islamophobia". He also expressed his understanding of racism in French society in the following terms:

> In Bordeaux, we tried to elaborate the theology of acculturation not in reaction to hostility. Because I don't think that France is hostile in any way towards Islam. That's something

> that I keep repeating in my class: we can't say things like "France is racist towards Muslims". There is no such thing as "France" or as "Muslims" to begin with, and each of these categories hides much more complexities and pluralism of opinions. We have already discussed this but it's normal that we have to reassure French people about Islam. Imagine if three million of Buddhists were to arrive in Morocco! That would require some adjustments as well.[viii]

In his intervention, the teacher deployed several rhetorical devices to minimise the extent of anti-Muslim hostility in French society. On one hand, he denied that anti-Muslim sentiments and discrimination constitute a current societal problem and relativised the intensity of Islamophobia by stressing that "not all French are racist". On the other hand, he presented anti-Muslim hostility as a "normal" reaction of the dominant society, reiterating to his students the line of thought that Tareq Oubrou, the Moroccan-born leader of the UOIF section in Bordeaux, defended publicly.[ix] To naturalise anti-Muslim hostility and make his point clearer, the teacher equated the "disturbing" presence of millions of Muslims in France with hypothetical millions of Buddhists arriving in Morocco.

Such euphemised understanding of anti-Muslim hostility does not nullify other actions taken by UOIF activists against Islamophobia and it would be tendentious to reduce these statements to a willingness to silence discriminatory practices and stereotypes. Yet, minimisation of anti-Muslim hostility is a recurring trait of my interlocutors' take on Islamophobia and can partly be explained by their particular migratory trajectories, as first-generation migrants who arrived in France for their university studies. This was the case for Lasfar, Oubrou, and the Mauritanian-born teacher quoted above. A representative survey of migrants and their children in France found that first-generation migrants coming to France as adults (especially those from North Africa and Turkey) are less likely than the majority population to consider racist discriminations to be widespread (Safi and Simon 2013). In any case, these euphemised understandings of racism have direct implications on the ways in which Muslim activists assign responsibility in countering Islamophobia.

Responsibility assignment in countering Islamophobia

Muslim activists of the UOIF use a broad range of terms to designate anti-Muslim hostility, such as "stigmatisation", "prejudices", "stereotypes" – with some expressions like "institutional racism" or "state racism" appearing almost absent from their vocabulary. While numerous

members of the UOIF use the term "Islamophobia" in their public interventions, others are more reluctant to do so (with no official positioning of the organisation on this matter). This is the case of Mohamed, a Tunisian born community leader in his late fifties who arrived in France in the late 1970s to pursue engineering studies and who played an important role in the foundation of the UOIF in 1983. For Mohamed, the term "Islamophobia" is misleading as it refers to psychological deficiencies: strictly speaking, it designates an emotion of fear and, as such, cannot be the object of political contestation or moral indignation. In an interview with me, he developed a distinction between Islamophobia (which he does not like to use) and being "anti-Muslim":

> Anti-Muslimness is reprehensible [*l'anti-musulman c'est condemnable*]. Like anti-Semitism. Because you are against someone for their membership, their appearance, their religion. It is reprehensible. But Islamophobia – that is, being afraid of someone – that's a feeling that pertains to psychiatry, to psychology. We cannot blame you for being afraid of me. It just means that you are sick and that we must treat you.[x]

Mohamed thus construes Islamophobia as a psychological deviance. Similar to him, UOIF activists often explain Islamophobia in terms of emotional dysfunction, prejudices and lack of education. Such individualist and psychological explanations of Islamophobia fit into a long tradition of "moral anti-racism" in French public discussions (Keyhani 2018) and stand in contrast with more politicised understandings of the term that are elaborated by relatively recent antiracist organisations such as the *Collectif contre l'islamophobie en France*, the *Mouvement des indigènes de la République* and *Mamans toutes égales*. These politicised definitions – which are largely discredited in public discussions – postulate an institutionalised and systemic exclusion of Muslim citizens from the social fabric (Kassir and Reitz 2016: 10; Picot 2016: 56).

Mohamed's definition of "anti-Muslimness" also contrasts with the above-mentioned organisations regarding blame assignment – signalling another dividing line in the associative landscape. For him, while "Islamophobia" is about the psychological deficiencies of some individuals, "anti-Muslimness" pertains to the concrete behaviours of Muslims themselves. He delineates the contours of Muslims' potential responsibility in rising anti-Muslim sentiments in the following terms:

> Regarding anti-Muslimness, there may be a Muslim responsibility. If someone is a pure anti-Muslim, that's reprehensible. You cannot hate Blacks because they are black or hate

> Arabs because they are Arabs or hate women because they are women. But you can hate women because they are annoying, you can hate Blacks because they are thieves, you can hate Arabs because they are aggressive. In this case, you hate a behaviour. And our role, in our struggle against Islamophobia or against anti-Islamism, is to be irreproachable. That is to say, we should not give any reason to the other to hate us or to be suspicious of us. And that's our responsibility.[xi]

Mohamed is positing a connection between anti-Muslim hostility and Muslims' behaviours. Through their demeanour, Muslims can spur hostile reactions and negative judgements, and it is their responsibility – he contends – to manage such public impressions. His claims to respect are thus not based on an inalienable right to equal treatment but rather on the ability of Muslims' behaviour to evolve. Overall, the distinction he draws between anti-Muslimness and Islamophobia testifies to the highly-contested nature of the term in public debates, with strong hesitancies in naming this phenomenon in France (Hajjat and Mohammed 2016), certainly, but also elsewhere in Europe (Meer and Modood 2009).

Mohamed is not the only UOIF leader to assign French Muslims a certain responsibility to be irreproachable to counter anti-Muslim feelings. This share of responsibility in the increasing stigmatisation of Islam is a recurring theme in Tareq Oubrou's media interventions.[xii] The notion is also articulated in a slightly different manner by Fouad Alaoui, another leader of the UOIF, who came to France from Morocco to pursue doctoral studies in neurosciences and who is now in charge of the publishing house associated with the UOIF. In a newsletter published by the organisation in 2010, Fouad Alaoui (who was president of the UOIF at the time) is asked about the "rampant Islamophobia" characterising French public discussions and about the solutions proposed by the UOIF to face this hostile climate. His response makes the following points:

> *Who do you think is responsible for Islamophobia escalation?*
> — Responsibility is shared. On one hand, it is true that the prevailing political discourse nourishes this climate and sets the focus on very marginal phenomena to stigmatise, often indirectly and with great subtlety, a whole community of faith. [...] On the other hand, Muslims in France often fail to produce the model that embodies the values of our religion. [...]
>
> *What is the duty of the Muslims of France, in these difficult times, and what proposes the UOIF?*

> — We call on the Muslims of France to multiply [outreach] initiatives to show their communities who they are. The duty of excellence is essential to all of us and to our children in particular. The time for reactivity is over, and history will not forgive us if we stay in this position that takes us away from our true responsibility.[xiii]

Alaoui's answers epitomise two characteristics of UOIF activists' antiracist repertoire: the emphasis on the partial responsibility of Muslims in the rise of Islamophobia, and the call for behavioural exemplarity to counter anti-Muslim prejudices (this second point is examined in the article's last sections).

The notion of responsibility is a leitmotiv for UOIF activists and is used to justify the prioritisation of "accommodationist" antiracist repertoire over more contentious responses. The true responsibility of Muslims is to show their communities who they are, says Alaoui. More broadly, UOIF members believe that French Muslims ought to use prudent responses against Islamophobia and avoid the pitfalls of two extreme positions: self-exclusion and victimisation.[xiv] In fact, the Muslim activists I interviewed are committed to producing disciplined and responsible subjectivities, especially amongst the Muslim youth in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. This is the case, for instance, of Mamadou, a leader of *Jeunes musulmans de France*, the youth association affiliated to the UOIF, who was quoted in a newspaper interview saying:

> Our project is educational, cultural and social. It is focused on young people, to make them responsible [...] The idea is to show them that you can be called Mohammed and become a lawyer. You are yourself Arab and you have another Arab in front of you, so it also avoids victimisation.[xv]

Underlying this quotation is the idea that social uplift through educational achievement and professional insertion could prevent a "victim mentality" amongst the French Muslim youth. Through a discourse of responsibility, Muslims are made accountable for the advancement of their community, suggesting a sort of inter-class policing at work within Muslim populations with socially privileged activists showing the path to success to their less privileged coreligionists. Interestingly, there is a similar inclination towards an achievement ideology and the downplaying of racism among other minority citizens in France, whether victims of racial discrimination (Eberhard 2010) or racialised professionals (Mesgarzadeh 2019). This convergence signals the importance of meritocratic ideals as well as the prevalence of a colour-

blind approach to social problems in the French context, as religion and race are not seen as constituting serious obstacles to social uplift. As demonstrated in comparative studies (Druez 2020; Talpin et al. 2021), members of minority groups in France are less equipped to frame experiences of inequality as "racism" due to their internalisation of colour-blind modes of reasoning. Lastly, Mamadou's comment points towards the second idea encapsulated in Alaoui's quotation above: that "responsibility" entails a certain behavioural self-discipline. This self-discipline is at the centre of the UOIF's antiracist repertoire, as demonstrated in the next section.

A call for commendable conduct to rebut racism

Muslim activists affiliated with the UOIF tend to conceive anti-Muslim hostility as a natural reaction of the dominant society and as partly dependent on Muslims' behaviour. In line with this framing, the antiracist tactics they promote often focus on Muslim individuals and their behaviour.

This is the case of Nabil Ennasri, a French-born community activist with a PhD in political science who despite not being a UOIF member was educated in UOIF circles and often participates in UOIF-sponsored gatherings. During his address at the Annual Gathering of North Muslims, which I attended in February 2016, he advised a crowded assembly of pious believers on the best ways to counter anti-Muslim racism. Bemoaning rising Islamophobia in France, he emphasised the imperative "to prove and demonstrate that we are genuine ambassadors of Islam", quoting the Prophet's saying of "That which admits majority into Jannah [Paradise] is fear of Allah and good manners". A colourful anecdote illustrated his point:

> There was some time ago a mosque project in the south of France, and what usually happens when there is a mosque project in a neighbourhood is a public outcry. People were not happy about it and circulated a petition against the mosque project. What did the project leaders do? They said that their neighbours were not real Islamophobes but were rather distrustful of Islam because of the anxious news reports that the media keep disseminating about Islam for the last thirty years. And so in order to debunk these fears and anxieties, the mosque project leaders decided to apply the *hadith* of the Prophet (peace be upon Him) and to adopt good behaviour vis-à-vis their neighbours. And in less than two years of good behaviour and polite interactions, notably with the strongest opponents to the project who were a retired couple living in the house adjacent to the mosque, the opponents changed their minds and the old couple even told their children that if their house was to be sold, it

> should be sold to the mosque leaders! [At this point, attendees spontaneously applauded]. What does this story tell us? It tells us that in order to counter and defuse Islamophobia, we must embrace the Islam of the middle way, the one promoted by the UOIF.[xvi]

Using an inspirational tone, Ennasri calls his coreligionists "to be genuine ambassadors of Islam" in the face of growing racism in French society – the image of "ambassadors" cutting across other narratives amongst European Muslims (Es 2019). He blames Islamophobia on media influence and considers mosque opponents "not real Islamophobes" but rather misinformed, ignorant people, in line with the psychological understanding of anti-Muslim hostility shared by Muslim activists quoted above. In terms of antiracist tactics, Ennasri emphasises exemplary behaviour and self-discipline as effective strategies to counter anti-Muslim feelings, justifying his argument by drawing on the Prophet's example. The idea is to educate non-Muslims about Islamic culture and dispel prejudices, although questions of equal treatment and social justice may become side-lined in the process. A similar propensity to counteract negative representations through the correction of stereotypes has been examined with regard to other people of North African origin in France (Killian and Johnson 2006) and bears resemblance with the willingness of Mexican-Americans in corporate jobs to educate their co-workers about their community instead of exposing their co-workers' racism (Agius Vallejo 2015: 81-82). While a significant part of Ennasri's speech is dedicated to promoting what he calls a responsible approach to Islamophobia, he considers this approach to be compatible with more confrontational anti-racist practices, such as involving oneself in associations like the *Collectif contre l'islamophobie en France* and making journalists accountable for their portrayal of Islam in the media.

Many Muslim activists affiliated with the UOIF go beyond Ennasri by prioritising an irreproachable behaviour over other forms of contestation. For them, the full inclusion of Muslims into the French body politics will be best achieved through an ethics of exemplarity rather than through the overt contestation of Muslim stigmatisation. The following quote by Imad – a Franco-Algerian UOIF member working in an Islamic institute of higher studies in Northern Paris – encapsulates the distinctions made between confrontation and exemplarity in the repertoire of action he envisioned. As he was discussing the divisions in Muslim political circles regarding the strategy to be adopted against the 2004 law banning religious symbols (i.e., the headscarf) in public schools, Imad noted that he considers "soft" tactics of exemplarity to be more efficient than protesting:

> For me, the most important thing to continue what we were doing is to normalise [Islam in France]. And we achieved something that no one else did: we sent a girl wearing the headscarf as a member of the university's administrative council. We don't need to make noise in demonstrations. We do it softly and beautifully. We were showing that a girl with a headscarf is not a danger to the Republic or to the identity. She is here, she wears the headscarf, she participates in meetings, she is positive, she is efficient. That was our strategy.[xvii]

For Imad, UOIF's broader project is to prove to non-Muslims that Muslims are responsible fellow citizens who embrace republican and Islamic values. Here again, socio-economic uplift is presented as a suitable channel for anti-racism politics, as opposed to demonstrations – a preference that could be accounted by the disqualification of group-based claims in the French colour-blind context (Dufoix 2016; Mohammed and Talpin 2018; see also the introduction to this special issue). In another part of the interview, he further stated that Muslims' involvement in public affairs should signal to non-Muslims that they are "correct, honest, involved and responsible people". Along with other interviewees, he subscribes to a strong belief in the power of individual self-management in response to stigmatisation – reminiscent of some middle-class African-Americans' "unrealistic faith in the ability of respectable behavior to dispel racial stereotypes" (Reed 2008: 36).

To some extent, this entreaty to demonstrate one's excellence in the face of suspicion and discrimination echoes the experiences of Muslims living in other minority environments. Some Australian Muslims wearing religious symbols, for instance, are careful to display an irreproachable conduct in public to best represent their religion (Harris and Karimshah 2019: 628). Similarly, some British Muslim women seek to demonstrate their exemplariness by allowing others to bypass them in supermarket queues or by always keeping their temper (Ryan 2011: 1052). In these instances and others (Eijberts and Roggeband 2016; Yilmaz et al. 2020), behavioural exemplarity appears as a way for Muslims to counter negative representations of Islam – even though these individual endeavours take on a specifically collective and politically concerted colouring in the case of UOIF activists.

This is also the message of the musical clip by Chamsudin *Ça va aller* ("It's going to be ok"), promoted on the YouTube channel of Havre de Savoir, an Islamic association affiliated with the UOIF, in which the artist asks his coreligionists to keep a "positive attitude" in the face of disparagement and hostility. The video clip – which was viewed over 270,000 times –

showcases a white company manager reading an Islamophobic newspaper at a café table and glancing with contempt at a racialised, veiled woman passing by who smiles back at him. The lyrics clarify the message and run as follows: "Respect to my sisters who wear the veil every day (*mashallah*), in this context where making such a choice is an act of bravery. [Respect] to all these women of worth, honourable and proud, and who smile in the face of sideways glances". Such economy of smiles (Gerrard 2019) – according to which Muslims are encouraged to cultivate cheery countenances, welcoming dispositions in small affective moments of social interactions – requires minority group members to constantly keep representational concerns in mind. Maintaining a happy disposition in the face of prejudice is the duty of veiled women but also of pious Muslim men – an endeavour to be exceedingly polite that surfaces in the narratives of Muslim citizens in other minority contexts (Yilmaz et al. 2020: 13). In the following scene of the videoclip, the same white manager's anti-Muslim prejudices are shattered when a racialised, devout Muslim man provides him assistance with his broken-down car, prompting him to hire the Muslim man who had been having difficulty finding a job despite strong professional credentials. The videoclip and the song's lyrics epitomise the guiding principles of UOIF leaders' anti-racist approach: suggesting the socio-economic worthiness of Muslims despite discrimination, calling coreligionists greet hostility with a smile, and embodying behavioural exemplariness as a way to educate prejudiced white people.

In these instances, contesting anti-Muslim hostility entails "normalising" Muslims' presence through class-laden self-presentation efforts. This approach contrasts with that of antiracist organisations, such as the *Collectif contre l'islamophobie en France* or *Mamans toutes égales* which both emerged in the mid-2000s with the explicit ambition to challenge Islamophobia (Asal 2017: 144). As noted earlier, UOIF activists largely differ from these newly arrived actors in their understanding of racism, explaining it in psychological terms rather than political ones, but also in their conception of how social change comes about, advocating for self-improvement rather than structural changes.

Emotional regulation and self-restraint in stigma management

Muslim activists of the UOIF are thus prone to defend cautious, meticulous strategies to counter negative representations of Islam in France. They urge their coreligionists to adopt irreproachable behaviours and invalidate any prejudice against Muslims on account of their own commendable conduct. In advocating for individual responses to stigma, they are able to circumvent the demonisation of group-based claim-making in the French public sphere, which

labels minority group activists as dangerous *communautaristes*. Yet, this antiracist approach is costly as it forces French Muslims to keep representational considerations in mind when confronted with disparaging treatments, and to remain restrained and self-controlled in the face of stigma.

This antiracist repertoire can be labour intensive. During a lesson at the Islamic school in Bordeaux, the teacher (the soft-spoken imam from Mauritania) was discussing the history of the Islamic New Year, which had occurred just two days before the class. Since the Islamic New Year celebrates the journey of the Prophet Muhammad from Mecca to Medina – known as the *Hijra* – the teacher questioned students about the Prophet's motivations for this migration and outlined the tense context of persecution that he was facing in his native city. Discussing the humiliations and attacks that characterised the Meccan episode, he addressed issues of racism and Islamophobia:

> So can you tell me what the attitude of the Prophet in Mecca was? Write this down. Did he say: "The people of Mecca are all racist. They don't like us. It's Islamophobia. It's Eric Zemmour [a French intellectual known for his Islamophobic public statements]!"? No, not at all. He didn't loathe them. He didn't insult them. He just ignored them.
>
> You have to remember that getting angry is too easy. It's a sign of weakness. Even though, of course, there are some legitimate feelings of anger in the face of unfair situations. But the attitude of the Prophet was rather to make invocations to his enemies: "Please God, forgive my community because they are ignorant", he would say.
>
> Now, let's apply this attitude to Bordeaux and France more generally. The Prophet is our model and greatly suffers in order to transmit these teachings to us, so let's take them seriously. What forms of oppression do you experience here and what attitudes do you observe? Personally, I have been living here for twenty-five years and I have never felt any racism![xviii]

The denial of racist attitudes in France spurred intense debate in the classrooms. Veiled students in particular raised their voices to contest what their teacher had just said. Several students subsequently recalled personal anecdotes in which they had faced discrimination or racist comments, whether in public school or on transit, in order to rebut their teacher's glib statements. Acknowledging the moral outrage of these situations, the teacher nevertheless sought to minimise the pervasiveness of racism in French society by reminding his students that racism touched other minority groups equally and that not all French people were racists. He

ultimately concluded the session by asserting that "when confronted with an unfair situation, the best attitude to have is indifference".

The exchange is particularly illuminating for two aspects. First, it shows that the euphemised assessments of racism proffered by some Muslim leaders of the UOIF are met with criticism by some of their coreligionists. Here, generational and migration-related dynamics are probably at work between first-generation migrants (such as the teacher) and children of immigrant descent (such as the students attending the religious school) – the latter being more likely to consider discrimination widespread and to report concrete experiences of unfair treatment (Safi and Simon 2013). It has been documented that second-generation Muslims or those who arrived in France as infants are also more vocal in claiming their rights and rejecting injustice (Haenni 2006: 120; Fernando 2014: 92-93). More broadly, based on my informal conversations with them, the young beneficiaries of UOIF activities – whether the children and teenagers attending Islamic weekend schools, the adult students enrolled in the Parisian institute of higher studies, or the youth participating in public conferences and other gatherings – appeared sceptical of the politically sanitised project of low-profile acculturation promoted by the UOIF. This was particularly salient in Bordeaux, where young Muslims vividly disagreed with Oubrou's call for a discreet visibility and appeasement regarding relations with non-Muslims.

Second, the vignette elucidates the emotional economy underpinning polite responses to stigmatisation, such as those advocated by the teacher. Anger is described as "too easy" compared to patience and indifference, which need to be cultivated when confronted with racism. The teacher further calls his students to imitate the Prophet because in face of hostility and stigmatisation, "He didn't loathe them. He didn't insult them. He just ignored them." Substantial affective labour is required on the part of the discriminated in the management of racist interactions. Muslims are asked to exercise constant self-control and self-management, in line with Tareq Oubrou's promotion of an exemplary attitude in the face of discrimination and his criticism of any victim-mentality amongst his coreligionists.[xix]

While the emphasis put on patience and self-control is particularly vivid in Oubrou's circles in Bordeaux, other sections of the UOIF follow the same strategy. In one newsletter published by the organisation in 2012 and targeting the educational leaders of the UOIF, an anonymous author justified the importance of patience in response to stigmatisation by drawing on a Quranic verse:

> The perception of Islam by our fellow French citizens suffers from a lot of prejudices and stereotypes that are conveyed through clichés and representations of very minority behaviours in the light of the peaceful and integrated Muslim presence. The media played a role of amplification while politicians, without ambitious project and out of inspiration, participate in this demonisation. Our duty is towards more openness, more peaceful speech and more patience, according to the verse:
>
> "You will certainly be put to test in respect of your properties and lives, and you will certainly hear many unpleasant things from those who were granted the Book before you and those who have associated others with Allah in His divinity. But if you are patient and pious ... this is the best resolution to take" (Surah Al-Imran, verse 186).[xx]

This written piece of advice positions openness, patience and piety as key Islamic virtues to be deployed in response to anti-Muslim biases. To a great degree, moods and emotions are remade into guiding principles of harmonious social interactions, with Muslims being required to perform certain types of emotional labour in the face of prejudice. In appearance, this emotional labour resembles the "management of self" analysed by Lamont and others (2016: 10). This type of response to stigma "entails individual calculations (in terms of emotion, energy, reputation, and resources) concerning the personal costs of responding". But this definition, which is premised upon notions from liberal theory (with rational individuals performing cost-benefit analyses to determine what is right for them), is not suited to fully capturing the sort of self-management encouraged by UOIF leaders.

Indeed, the emotional labour valorised in UOIF circles is incorporated into a broader project of pious self-realisation, with a view to shaping disciplined ethical subjectivities (Beaugé 2015; Parvez 2017). This broader project makes sense within the revivalist approach of the "Islam of the middle way" (*wasatiyya*), which equates moderation with compassionate forbearance (Kamali 2015: 14) and aims at the accomplishment of virtuous acts. The Islamic notion of patience and perseverance (*sabr*) thus becomes a useful tool for accepting adversities and avoiding the desire to complain. A published piece on one UOIF-affiliated blog suggests this as well: that negative emotions need to be contained and restrained in reaction to Islamophobic outbursts to allow room for rational reactions.[xxi] In another piece, published on the UOIF website for Women's Day, Muslim women are called upon to react with intelligence and discernment to hostile demonstrations, to not become embittered, to keep smiling in the face of adversity and (if they were to be seized by feelings of anger) to transform those negative emotions into positive motivators for becoming socially involved.[xxii] In these instances and in

similar ways to other Muslim communities in Europe (Jouili 2015; Es 2019), emotional self-monitoring regarding restraint and composure is presented as the optimal response to anti-Muslim hostility. However, this strategy tends to obscure the psychological toll that repressing one's emotions may have on mental health.

Conclusion

The antiracist strategies advocated by Muslim leaders of the UOIF are deeply informed by their religious ethic of personal responsibility and self-reliance. In their view, Muslim individuals are partly responsible for the representations about Islam disseminated in French society. Consequently, they have a duty to correct misconceptions and dispel anti-Muslim prejudices, which they explicitly condemn and oppose. For them, the destigmatisation of Islam is best achieved through a strict policing of Muslims' own conduct and a permanent attention to self-discipline. In other words, the prime ways in which they seek to rebut anti-Muslim hostility entail moral improvement and self-management. Such positioning makes sense in their broader embrace of respectability politics, a collective antiracism strategy which aims at introducing alternate public images of Muslim communities through behavioural exemplarity (Dazey 2021). Such strategy appears widespread amongst Muslim worshippers in other minority contexts (Ryan 2011: 1052; Jouili 2015: 165-166; Özyürek 2015: 44-45; Eijberts and Roggeband 2016: 142-143; Es 2019: 6-8; Harris and Karimshah 2019: 628; Yilmaz et al. 2020: 12-13), but takes part in a collective, politically concerted project of community uplift in the case UOIF leaders.

For UOIF leaders, this choice of tactics is partly informed by their experience as first-generation migrants who are less keen to identify and contest discrimination. It is also shaped by their middle-class ethos that encapsulates a complex set of values including politeness, discretion, religious observation, and socio-economic uplift. Most decisively, their encouragement of non-confrontational tactics is grounded in their spiritual standing – an under-researched dimension of anti-racist repertoires which underlines the ethical underpinnings of respectability politics. Practicing patience and perseverance (*sabr*) is part of their effort to fashion pious subjectivities – in line with the *wasatiyya* approach, which equates moderation with compassionate forbearance. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the prioritisation of good manners in their antiracist strategies coincides with a certain reluctance to deploy more confrontational means of action, such as public demonstrations or mobilisations centred on anti-discrimination rights. Doing so is a way for Muslim activists to accommodate the French republican

disqualification of group-based claims-making and the particular scrutiny that weighs upon an organisation as controversial as the UOIF. However, this leads these activists to feed unwittingly into colour-blind conceptions of justice and defend potentially politically disempowering solutions like emotional self-regulation.

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[i] The *Union des organisations islamiques de France* (UOIF) was founded in 1983 by pious Muslim students with sympathies for the Muslim Brotherhood. The organisation progressively evolved into a grassroots movement, with some sixty affiliated associations scattered around France providing community services to worshippers and religious guidance on the compatibility between the Islamic faith and the French environment. The organisation was renamed *Musulmans de France* in 2017, although I use the name UOIF in the rest of the article for clarity purposes. For some socio-historical insights, see Dazey 2018.

[ii] In terms of national origins, out of 42 interviewees, 12 were born in Morocco, 8 in Tunisia, 5 in Algeria, 3 in Lebanon, 1 in Egypt, 1 in Mauritania, 1 in Niger, and 10 in France. Nine were between 20-34 years old at the time of the interview; 15 between 35-49 years old; and 18 between 50-64 years old. I interviewed only two female members of the UOIF. While UOIF membership is largely male-dominated, this gender imbalance is even more pronounced regarding people in leadership position, who were my principal interlocutors. For instance, in the UOIF committee meeting I attended, there were three female participants and 30 male participants. In contrast with formal interviews, which were mostly conducted with men, ethnographic observations were mostly gathered in female-dominated environments, such as the female section of mosques or amongst female students in classes.

[iii] Official statutes of the UOIF, 2017.

[iv] In the aftermath of the 2015 terror attacks in Paris (in January with the Charlie Hebdo shooting and in November with coordinated attacks across the city) and the 2016 truck attack in Nice, French Muslims in general and UOIF activists in particular were subjected to increased public scrutiny. In the case of the UOIF, the growth of autobiographical accounts by reformed activists, a smear poster campaign equating the UOIF with terrorism as well as frequent condemnations of the organisation by politicians precipitated a moral panic surrounding the organisation's alleged fundamentalism. Political and media scrutiny peaked during the 2017 presidential campaign, which witnessed the intensification of calls for the organisation's dissolution.

[v] See the summary of the event published on the UOIF website https://www.musulmansdefrance.fr/2eme-journee-internationale-contre-lislamophobie/, accessed 30 November, 2020. The International Day of Islamophobia is a public event gathering anti-racist activists and scholars to discuss the best means of action against anti-Muslim hostility.

[vi] All names of interviewees have been changed to protect anonymity, except when quoting participants in public events (or publications) in which they participated under their name.

[vii] Transcription based on my fieldwork notes, Le Bourget, May 2016.

[viii] Transcription based on my fieldwork notes, Bordeaux, November 2018.

[ix] For instance, Tareq Oubrou quoted in *Sud-Ouest*, 8 April 1996: "To the question 'why is the French State oppressing us?', the imam replied that it was 'the normal reaction of a society that has to do with a new component that poses a problem to the definition of secularism'".

[x] Interview with Mohamed, La Courneuve, September 2016.

[xi] Interview with Mohamed, La Courneuve, September 2016.

[xii] See for intance Oubrou's interview in *Sud-Ouest*, 30 May 2019.

[xiii] Fouad Alaoui quoted in *La Lettre de l'UOIF n°4*, October 2010, p. 5.

[xiv] *Les cahiers de l'éducation* (UOIF), March 2012.

[xv] Mamadou quoted in *Le Monde*, 3 April 2012.

[xvi] Transcription based on my fieldwork notes, Lille, February 2016.

[xvii] Interview with Imad, Saint-Denis, December 2015.

[xviii] Transcription based on my fieldwork notes, Bordeaux, October 2015.

[xix] See, for instance, Oubrou's interview in *Le Monde*, 4 December 2009 in which he asserts that "Racism is not new, but personally I don't see the Islamophobia which is presented as a plague of our society. I don't accept this position of victimhood and this consumerist posture towards rights." Not being seen as a victim is also a concern for anti-Islamophobia initiatives in the Netherlands (Koning 2016).

[xx] *Les cahiers de l'éducation* (UOIF), March 2012.

[xxi] http://www.havredesavoir.fr/reactions-au-sujet-du-film-polemique-entre-raison-et-emotion/, accessed 22 June, 2019.

[xxii] http://www.musulmansdefrance.fr/appel-coeur-toi-soeur/, accessed 22 June, 2019.